

# Tuberculosis – Back to the Future

JDH Porter, KPWJ McAdam (Eds)

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*Tuberculosis – Back to the Future* was the title of the Third Annual Public Health Forum held at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine held between April 18-21, 1993. The Forum focused on tuberculosis in developing countries and brought together scientists working on tuberculosis research and public health experts involved in tuberculosis control from 53 countries. The objectives of the Forum were to describe the global burden of tuberculosis and predict the likely trends over the next decade, to increase international awareness of the tuberculosis epidemic accompanying HIV infection, to identify and prioritise major research issues relating to tuberculosis and to address specific tuberculosis control measures including diagnosis, treatment, vaccination and control strategies. This book details the proceedings and deliberations at the Forum and provides much up to date information on many aspects of tuberculosis control.

A review of the historical background and global situation is aptly followed by an early chapter on the impact of interaction with HIV since it is the "unholy alliance" with HIV that has resulted in greatly renewed interest in tuberculosis in the 1980s and 1990s. There is also a chapter on multidrug resistant tuberculosis which has surfaced as a major public health issue in the 1990s in association with the HIV epidemic and aggravated by other factors such as homelessness, immigration, intravenous drug use, poverty and poor access to primary health care.

Among the research issues discussed were discovery and testing of new drugs, new vaccines and diagnostic tools. Although much work has been done on immunological mechanisms in tuberculous infection a better vaccine than BCG has not been found. Furthermore, early case detection using molecular methods such as the polymerase chain reaction seem to be exciting new developments but these techniques have yet to be developed into simple, affordable diagnostic tests which can be used under programme conditions in developing countries.

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Common problems encountered in tuberculosis control such as late diagnosis, non-compliance of patients with treatment and unreliable drug supply were highlighted. The section on treatment services rightly emphasises the importance of well organised treatment services, the use of short-course chemotherapy regimes and supervision of drug therapy. The appropriateness of preventive therapy for tuberculosis in developing countries was debated and many questions regarding this control strategy remain unanswered. The most interesting chapter was on resource allocation priorities; when health benefits were measured using disability adjusted life years (DALYs), short course chemotherapy for smear-positive tuberculosis emerges as one of the most cost-effective health interventions available.

On the subject of a fully integrated national tuberculosis programme suggested for developing countries, I feel that this may give the best outcome in countries with very few resources but the national tuberculosis programme in our country should retain a few selected elements of special professional competence and earmarked resources for the treatment services. Although most tuberculosis control activities such as case finding, supervision of ambulatory treatment, contact tracing, defaulter tracing and BCG vaccination may be fully integrated into the primary health care system, there should be special leadership input by trained physicians to ensure effective treatment and a high cure rate and fragmentation of treatment services should be avoided so that important programme elements will not be lost.

This book is well edited and easy to read, yet gives an excellent state of the art overview of tuberculosis control and tuberculosis research. I would recommend it to clinicians looking after tuberculosis patients as well as public health doctors and policy makers involved in resource allocation and programme planning.